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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000910

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
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PARIS FOR JMILLER

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [LE](#) [SA](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MARCH 14 TAKES ON WATER AS THE CREW AWAITS THE
CAPTAIN'S ORDERS

REF: BEIRUT 887

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Kataeb Party leader Amine Gemayel is pushing hard for two (unspecified) ministerial seats, according to the Hariri camp. His unhappiness with the cabinet formation process thus far has led to rumors that he may withdraw from March 14. Meanwhile, March 14 secretariat officials insist it is up to the Saudis to convince Hariri that keeping the March 14 Coalition together is more important than reveling in the premiership. Both Hariri and President Michel Sleiman continue to object to Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's insistence that his son-in-law Gebran Bassil be included in the next government. End summary.

GEMAYEL TO PART
WAYS WITH MARCH 14?

2. (C) Kataeb Party leader Amine Gemayel may be the next in line to part ways with the March 14 Coalition, some fear. Caretaker Minister of Economy and Trade Mohammad Safadi in an August 13 meeting with the Ambassador and PolOff admitted that Gemayel's departure was not imminent, but he speculated the Kataeb leader could leave the alliance within the next five or six months. Safadi attributed Gemayel's unease to the general feeling among Lebanon's political class that Syria's influence in the country was growing, and he speculated that Gemayel may be adopting a more centrist position.

3. (C) In a separate meeting with PolChief the same day, March 14 Secretary General Fares Souaid said March 14's future depends almost entirely on Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri. According to Souaid, if Hariri is not committed to uniting the coalition, it will almost certainly fall apart. Hariri plans to hold a low-profile meeting at his home tomorrow night with Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea, March 14th figure Samir Frangieh, caretaker Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, and Souaid to plan the coalition's

next steps. Souaid said Gemayel, who has met with both Syrian-linked Wiam Wahhab and Marada head Sleiman Franjieh in the last week, had purposely not been asked to attend the meeting. Souaid argued that despite this snub, Gemayel is unlikely to leave March 14 because independently he cannot compete with Geagea and he craves cabinet positions promised him by the coalition. The primary goal of tomorrow's meeting, according to Souaid, will be reassure an increasingly anxious Geagea (who has been out of the country) that Hariri is invested in March 14 and to clarify that Hariri will not "sell the heads of the March 14 Christians" to Syria as part of Syrian-Saudi rapprochement. According to Nader Hariri, however, Amine Gemayel is insisting on two (unspecified) ministerial portfolios for Kataeb that Saad is not willing to give. Amine's insistence on "an active presence" translates into a desire for more cabinet positions than appropriate for the five-MP Kataeb bloc.

14. (U) For his part, Gemayel reiterated in a press conference today his support for Saad Hariri and his opposition to reopening the 15-10-5 cabinet formula. He underscored that in his meetings with Frangieh and Wahhab he expressed his desire for good relations with Syria as expressed through the Lebanese state. In addition, he called on the Syrian government to address all outstanding issues between it and Lebanon, such as Lebanese detainees, border demarcation, and armed rejectionist Palestinian groups. (Note: We will be meeting with Gemayel Augsut 14. End note.)

MARCH 14 COALITION CONCERNED

BEIRUT 00000910 002 OF 002

15. (C) Meanwhile, Geagea is concerned that Hariri is neglecting the coalition as he assumes his new role as Prime Minister, according to Souaid. Hariri reportedly failed to telephone Geagea while both were vacationing in France last week and when Geagea attempted to telephone Hariri, the latter refused the call, upsetting the LF leader. Souaid said that Geagea is eager to preserve the coalitio and performed admirably following Walid Jumblat's inflammatory remarks, but he knows he cannot maintain the coalition without Hariri. Souaid observed Hariri should learn from his father, who succeeded because he knew that "in Lebanon, relationships are more important than ideas."

16. (C) Souaid insisted it is up to the Saudis to convince Hariri that the March 14 coalition is more important than the premiership. If Hariri allows the coalition to disintegrate, he will have no parliamentary majority and will allow the Syrians to "put Lebanon under their thumb," as when Rafiq Hariri assumed the premiership in 1992. Instead, Souaid assessed, Hariri should seek to build a strong coalition such as the one that coalesced in the aftermath of his father's assassination in 2005. "No matter how much money Saad has," observed Souaid, "he will be nothing without allies."

AOUN REMAINS THE PERENNIAL THORN IN EVERYONE'S SIDE

17. (C) Having met with Hariri the evening before, Safadi believed Hariri was "comfortable" with the current status of cabinet negotiations. He also said both Hariri and President Michel Sleiman continued to object to Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun's insistence that his son-in-law caretaker Telecommunications Minister Gebran Bassil be included in the next government. Safadi said that he was encouraging Hariri to secure the Ministry of Energy and Water for March 14 and that he had requested to stay on as head of the Ministry of Economy and Trade. He mused that he would welcome the opportunity to become the next Minister of Foreign Affairs, although he admitted it would be unlikely for Hizballah and its allies to relinquish the portfolio. Although he was optimistic about the prospects for Hariri's

success, Safadi was worried that the failure to agree upon a cabinet by the beginning of Ramadan would be disastrous.

COMMENT

18. (U) Given the protracted cabinet formation process, Saad Hariri nonetheless remains stoic, telling the media this evening that "the difficulties that we are facing regarding the names of ministers and their portfolios are normal and can be solved through dialogue." End comment.

SISON